

**'15 & Forward External Listening Session  
& Informal Region 7 CAC Meeting  
Region 7 HQ, Miles City – July 23, 2015**

**FWP staff present:** Brad Schmitz, Erin O'Connor, Caleb Bollman, John Ensign, Nate Powell, Mike Backes, Charlie Sperry, Deb O'Neill

**Public present:** 17 individuals (two non-participating)

*-CAC members present: Bob Hagedorn, Bob Gilbert, Glenn Heitz, Ed Bukoskey, Gary Sparks, Dale Kreiman*

**Introduction:** Brad began the evening by introducing himself and giving a brief explanation of why everyone has been invited to this meeting. He then asked the attendees to introduce themselves.

Charlie and Deb from the FWP Resource Management Unit (RMU) then showed the '15 & Forward PowerPoint presentation. The '15 & Forward project is a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks initiative to improve the way we serve our public and outdoor resources in the years ahead. Deb explained that this process has to be done periodically to make sure the Department is relevant and on track. The last time this was done was in 1998. Our vision is the foundation on which we build plans, programs and services. Staff members have already participated in their own listening session and will not be participating tonight; they will only be assisting with some exercises. The information provided from attendees tonight will help update our current vision and help determine how we are going to meet everyone's needs.

Deb then provided the ground rules for this listening session and explained the clicker exercises, which is where everyone will be able to instantly see what their peers think after responding to a variety of questions.

Deb and Charlie then split the attendees into three breakout groups. The groups were asked to think about what the Department does well or what its strengths are when it's at its best, what its weaknesses are when it's at its worst and what challenges the Department is facing. Group facilitators were Caleb, Brad and John.

**Breakout Session #1**

**Group 1**

**Strengths:** Staff is engaged, Dept has good education programs, is a positive presence, good interagency relationships, good public relationships, the Block Management program is very good and the staff's efforts are appreciated, Region 7's Block Management program seems to be more refined than other regions.

Weaknesses: Landowners don't see biologists in the field enough, perception that FWP works for special interest groups, FWP works for money and not the public trust or the resource, the Department's need for funding surpasses biological common sense, staff needs to visit with landowners more, need more on-the-ground presence.

Challenges: Open unit management of ungulates, perception versus reality, how to improve the Department's image, earmarked funding and where it is being spent, the sale of surplus Nonresident deer combos need to be tightened up, loss of access and the consequential impact to hunter recruitment, not enough Hunter Ed classes and instructors, challenge of informing the public and technology, relationships with Federal agencies, stopping exclusive access to elk, and the shift of hunters from the west coming to the east.

## **Group 2**

Strengths: The Block Management staff and crew, staff in general are accommodating, the Bow Ed and Hunter Ed programs have passionate volunteers and the programs give consistent messages, when the public speaks favorably of the Department – people listen, the Department is good at responding to overpopulations where there's not an issue of animals being harbored, Kids Fishing Days are great, Winston Greeley and his Outdoor Reports are great.

Weaknesses: When the public speaks negatively of the Dept everyone hears it, no more free licenses for first-time hunters, the apprentice hunter (10 year olds) legislation, bison issues causing friction between the Department and public, land decisions and determining prices paid for property, need to do a better job of timely public presentations surrounding controversial subjects, wardens' time and efforts aren't utilized well, poor warden retention, certain groups hold "sway" over elk, regulation complexity, restrictive regulations, overflow of hunters coming to Region 7.

Challenges: Youth engagement, hunter retention, licenses are getting too expensive for the average nonresident hunter, differentiating legislative mandates versus Department directives and policies, the perception of the Department buying property and undercutting other interested buyers, political influences, retaining wardens, brucellosis, need to be more politically engaged, harboring of game, and why are other regions not as friendly as Region 7.

## **Group 3**

Strengths: The work FWP does with citizens, honesty, the programs FWP offers (Kids Fishing Days, Hunter Ed, etc.), fishing access sites, staff here has a good image and is helpful, FWP asks what the public thinks and not just tells them what they're going to do, FWP works well with other agencies.

Weaknesses: The 'Wardens' TV show is not good for FWP's image, some wardens' attitudes leave the average person feeling interrogated, wardens need better people skills, exploitation of authority, ignoring biologists' recommendations, decisions are not based on what the public expects of FWP,

communities don't see the office staff and biologists – they only mostly see wardens and when that experience is bad it makes the entire Department look bad.

**Challenges:** Balancing the interests of hunters, landowners and outfitters, politics, access in some areas is limited, the nationwide perception of hunting becoming a rich man's sport, young hunter retention, opening up private land, a few bad apples ruining it for everyone and landowner's consequentially closing off access, the shift from small ranch operations to large operations, getting better quality hunting available to hunters, outfitters locking up access.

### **Clicker Exercise #1**

Deb then moved into the first clicker exercise. She explained that this done to try to understand the public's values and perceptions. Having completed several other previous listening sessions, she and Charlie are starting to notice some regional differences.

### **Breakout Session #2**

Attendees were asked to join their group again to do some brainstorming. Groups were asked to list what work they think FWP does and what work they think FWP should be doing going forward into the future (at least for the next ten years).

#### **Group 1**

What work does FWP do? –Common themes were wildlife management, education and public interaction.

What work should FWP do? –Common themes were ungulate management, education, recruitment and retention, and access improvement.

#### **Group 2**

What work does FWP do? -Common themes were protecting and managing wildlife, enforcement, education and planning.

What work should FWP do? –Common themes were education, recruitment and retention, improving the Department's image, broadening FWP's funding base, staff retention, and improving communication.

#### **Group 3**

What work does FWP do? –Common themes were wildlife management, public interaction, and education.

What work should FWP do? –Common themes were becoming more active in disseminating information independently, hunter recruitment and retention.

### **Clicker Exercise #2**

Deb explained the last set of clicker exercises. This set of questions concerns FWP's guiding principles, which is the rules or values that set our direction. These are currently in our vision and guide what we do.

**Closing:** Deb thanked attendees for coming and providing feedback. Director Hagener is behind this effort 100%. There are 113 staff members from across the state involved with this effort. Their time with the Department ranges from six months to 30 years. This is our future and Director Hagener let us design it as we see fit. The public's input is very valuable to us. FWP staff is the public's resource; if anyone has questions, concerns or comments please reach out to them. The public comment period for '15 & Forward runs until August 16<sup>th</sup>. Deb then showed on the FWP website where and how comments can be submitted if folks want to send those electronically.

Brad also thanked attendees, as well as Deb and Charlie, for coming. He encouraged attendees to visit with staff if anyone has questions.